



California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF)

# Conservation Camp Program



## COOPERATIVE PROGRAM

CDF is currently authorized to operate 39 Conservation Camps statewide that house nearly 4,000 inmates and wards. These camps are operated in conjunction with the California Department of Corrections (CDC) and the California Youth Authority (CYA). Through these cooperative efforts CDF is authorized to operate 198 fire crews year round. These crews are available to respond to all types of emergencies including wildfires, floods, search and rescues, and earthquakes. When not responding to emergencies, the crews are busy with conservation and community service work projects for state, federal, and local government agencies. Fire crews perform several million hours of emergency response each year and more on work projects.

## FIRE CREWS

California's Conservation Camp Program fire crews, also known as hand crews, provide the muscle that enables CDF to achieve the Department's mission. A primary objective within that mission is to "reduce life, property, and natural resource losses through the implementation of balanced fire prevention, fire protection planning, presuppression, and suppression activities." Fire crews make up the platoons of foot soldiers on the "front line" day and night, when California experiences one of its many natural or human caused disasters, or one of its burgeoning number of minor emergencies that occur on a daily basis. The crews are completely mobile throughout the state and are strategically located in areas that are most likely to need their assistance.



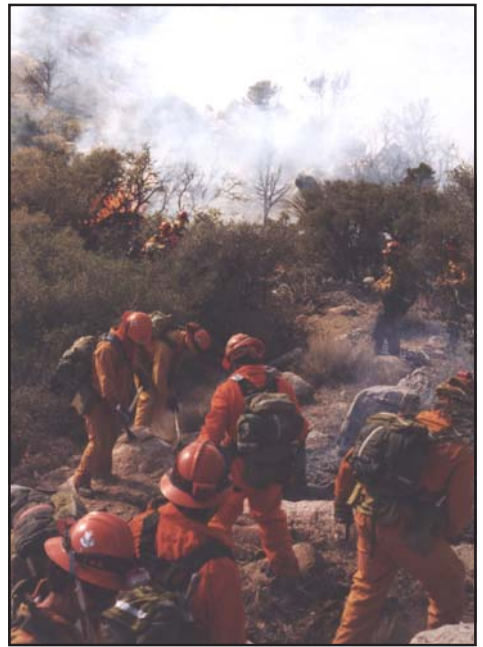
These fire crews are highly trained and motivated, well organized within each crew unit, well supervised by permanently assigned personnel, and well cared for by the custodial agency responsible for their health and welfare. They are carefully screened by these custodial agencies for their suitability for the program, including physical, emotional, and intellectual aptitudes, as well as a lack of arson in their records. Potential crew members are evaluated again during physical fitness training by the custodial agency and yet again during their basic training by CDF. Fire Crew Firefighter Basic Training consists of a week of classroom training and a week of field training and covers wildland fire safety and attack, hand tool use, teamwork, and crew expectations. Once assigned to a fire crew, a minimum of four hours-per-week of advanced training is provided to each fire crew firefighter, with some members progressing to more responsible positions on the crew.

All CDF fire crews are tested each spring during Fire Crew Preparedness Exercises. These exercises consist of several wildland fire fighting evolutions, stressing teamwork and safety. They also take on a certain air of competition. Basic preparedness exercises include: equipment readiness, knowledge of fire fighting and safety principles, physical condition, teamwork, and conduct. By the end of their day of evaluations, crewmembers have been thoroughly inspected, along with their crew-carrying vehicle. They have hiked four miles in 65 minutes with full gear and tools, have cut 100 yards of fire line through brush, some have extended 1,000 feet of progressive hose lay, and many have constructed a safety zone and deployed a fire shelter. Some exercises include working with live fire, helicopters, bulldozers, and other emergency related activities.

## EMERGENCY ACTIVITIES

CDF fire crews are available year-round; consequently, they have become California's storm troopers, logging some 426,090 hours of flood fighting in January of 1997 alone. During a destructive fire season fire crews are in such high demand that their availability is often critically low and, at times, non-existent. All of California's major disasters over the last few years have seen the assistance of the fire crews in either a labor intensive effort to contain and mitigate the situation, such as the fires, heavy snows, search and rescue operations, earthquakes and floods, or in more of a support role, such as staffing a mobile kitchen unit during the Los Angeles riots.

On fires, building "freeways" with chain saws and hand tools through whatever vegetation happens to be in the line of fire is normal crew routine. However, direct attack, where the crew's efforts are applied directly to the flaming front of the fire, is the tactic of choice when the distance between the wildfire, and life and property grows smaller. You will also see these crews ahead of the fire setting up to protect structures. They may conduct "firing out" operations as the main fire approaches, burning from a control line or the defensible space around structures toward the wildfire, consuming the brush and other vegetation between their position and the wildfire. This tactic increases the defensible space that the crewmembers must inhabit during the assault by the wildfire. After the fire front passes, they will then extinguish any small fires that have ignited on or around the structures before moving on to their next assignment. Other fire crew activities one can witness, if they venture away from the pavement, are hot-spotting, or attacking faster burning or particularly threatening areas of the fire, providing support for air attack operations, extending hose lays, mop-up, and patrol. All this for \$1 per hour of emergency pay.



## CALIFORNIA BENEFITS

The citizens of California reap a significant fiscal benefit by housing their low risk inmates and wards in the conservation camps. Many of the inmates and wards receive a new lease on life at camp where they learn honest skills and work ethics that will serve them well after their prison stay. Another taxpayer benefit is the labor these "campers" provide for conservation related projects. Basically, this is free labor, with Fire Crew Captain supervision, for work projects that would not otherwise be affordable for many government agencies. CDF is careful not to compete with, or displace, private enterprise in the approval, scheduling, and execution of these jobs.

Conservation camps provide community services and a source of income to many small communities and sparsely populated areas in rural California. A typical conservation camp will be located within a few miles of a small population center. It will have a civil service staff of at least 24 employees, between CDF and the cooperating agency, and will field five fire crews. The budget for a typical camp, including both agencies' payroll and operating costs, is about \$2.35 million. Many of the goods and services required for operation of the conservation camp will be purchased from local vendors, and it is common for staff to be active, involved members of the local community.

CDF values and appreciates the cooperation of the Department of Corrections, and the Department of the Youth Authority. Without their commitment and dedication to the program, Californians would not be enjoying these social, economic, environmental, and aesthetic benefits.



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**[www.fire.ca.gov](http://www.fire.ca.gov)**